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ABSTRACT

Current attitudes toward newsgathering by the world press consist of two opposing points of view: "free flow" (objective news transmitted quickly, free from censorship) identified with Western capitalist nations and "balanced flow" (news has educational and social value; information and distribution are limited) identified with Eastern socialist and authoritarian nations. These points of view are based on economic, political, and ideological philosophies which are in turn based on perceived self-interest. Since third world goals and aspirations have been largely disregarded by the press, representatives of those countries have met and discussed creating a pool of news agencies which would collect and distribute news and information from the developing world to the rest of the world, upgrading the educational/indoctrinational capabilities of the media. The free flow proponents have seen this as a threat in terms of both philosophy and competition. An alternative to such a third news network would be an increased sense of social responsibility on the part of free flow proponents and a less heavy-handed, dogmatic approach on the part of the balanced flow proponents, each providing more educational, culturally valid information of and for the third world. (TJ)

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MASS MEDIA, PROPAGANDA TOOL OR CULTURAL BRIDGE?: AN EVALUATION OF THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE 'FREE FLOW' AND 'BALANCED FLOW' OF WORLD INFORMATION

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Before I turned to the honest and enobling work of professing for a living, I was a journalist. I worked as a copy editor for a metropolitan newspaper and, before that, I was a foreign correspondent for a press association--United Press International.

I mention my journalistic background for two reasons. In the first place I want to establish my credentials so that it will be clear that my remarks about the mass media are not made in ignorance of the practices, procedures, constraints and limitations that the mass media are subject to. All too often journalists are taken to task for wrongs over which they have no control, by persons whose credentials as critics include subscription to a daily newspaper and witnessing for Walter Cronkite at 5:30 every weekday. In the second place, I mention my journalistic experience because I want to use a wire service term that I think is valuable in dealing with part of the material I've been assigned to cover. The term is "write through." That's w-r-i-t-e through, not r-i-g-h-t through. When a big story breaks somewhere in the world, press association correspondents send a bulletin, a 40 to 50 word summary of the event, to the agency headquarters in New York. The bulletin is followed by a first lead, which gives the details of the story as they are known at the time. As more and more things occur, the correspondents file second, third, fourth, fifth leads on the same story.

Some fundamental elements of the story may not be clear for several hours. After the bureau has filed a number of "leads", the correspondent may file a write-through. A write-through is designed to consolidate information given in the various leads and present it in an order which clarifies and solidifies the story. I think we need an academic write-through on the controversy surrounding the international flow of news.

It is not possible to deal in a paper of this scope with the myriad ideological, political and technical complexities of this problem, but it is possible, I think, to

identify the major elements of the problem. At the same time I think it is important to dismiss certain issues that, while provocative, do not really have much to do with the problem. The major combatants in the controversy over the international flow of news, have drawn battle lines so that they can fight for the right as they see it.

One group, identified with the developed Western capitalist nations advocates a modified status quo and are advocates of "The Free Flow of Information." The other group, identified with the Eastern socialist and authoritarian nations seek to establish new measures of control to insure "A Balanced Flow of Information."

These two concepts are based on economic, political and ideological philosophies which in turn are based on perceived self interest, with legitimate Third World goals and aspirations being largely disregarded or co-opted.

It is my intention to outline briefly the major points of these two opposing positions, then to analyze and evaluate them and offer some comments.

THE "FREE FLOW" POSITION

Those who advocate the "free flow" position cite Resolution 59 (1) adopted in the first session of the United Nations General Assembly which stated:

> Freedom of information implies the right to gather, transmit and publish news anywhere and everywhere without fetters. As such it is an essential factor in any serious effort to promote the peace and progress of the world.

They cite further Article 18 Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

> Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and import information or ideas through any medium and regardless of frontiers.

The need, say the "free flow", advocates is to keep both sources of information and opportunities to distribute information unfettered and uncontrolled by government restric-

tions. Clayton Kilpatrick, editor and executive vice-president of the Chicago Tribune, and a leading proponent of the free flow position, cites James Madison: "Nothing could be more irrational than to give the people power, and to withold from them information without which power is abused," and Jefferson,'The only security of all is in a free press....No government ought to be without censors; and where the press is free no one ever will." (Kilpatrick, 1978). Later, in the same piece, citing the U.S. Constitution, Kilpatrick puts emphasis on the language of the free speech, free press provisions saying that the language "does not convey a general permissive license to the press or to orators in town squares. It is expressed in the form of a restraint upon government: 'Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...' This emphasizes the watchdog role of free news media which Madison and Jefferson described.

"Under the First Amendment the government is required to tolerate criticism; it is forced to tolerate dissent; it is forced to conduct public business with all the openness that an aggressive and probing press could achieve."

Following the adoption of the UN resolutions on freedom of information, organizations such as the International Press Institute (IPI), the Inter American Press Association, the Inter American Federation of Working Newspapermen's Organizations, the Freedom of Information Center, Inter American Association of Broadcasters, The International Federation of Journalists and others, kept tabs on the world's "free flow of information" and reported their findings in publications and conferences. The focus of their efforts was on maintaining freedom of movement for foreign correspondents, freedom from censorship for publications, and freedom from government harrassment for domestic journalists.

The "free flow" advocates also placed emphasis on the value of objectivity in international news flow. It is valuable, they said, to publish information in which the sources of the information are cited, the facts are attributed and opposing views are

given even-handed treatment. Free flow supporters said that in addition to being objective, news must be transmitted quickly and efficiently. The immediacy factor in the news flow pattern, they said, provides for greater honesty. There is less opportunity for "gatekeepers" to manage the news. An adjunct to the "immediacy" factor is the factor of competition. Because journalists for leading international news agencies and broadcast organizations compete for news, there is little likelihood that important news developments will be supressed by individual journalists for political or economic considerations.

The fact that news, by definition, is "interruption of the status quo," gives free flow proponents full justification for the fact that much of the information they present is "bad" news--disaster, destruction, corruption and human malefaction. There is no lasting value, they say, in blaming and berating the messengers who bear these bad tidings.

Giving the "customer" what he wants, is a practice of the free flow system. If sensationalism and celebrities are what the reading and viewing public desires, then a free media system will provide sensational news stories, and will keep up with the comings and goings of Jacqueline Onassis and Muhamed Ali, in addition to providing day to day coverage of major and minor events on the globe.

This has been a brief and necessarilty limited look at the position of the "free flow" proponents in the controversy over international news. Let me turn now to a presentation of those who espouse another view.

THE "BALANCED FLOW" POSITION

For a number of years following World War II there was little controversy over the content of the flow of news. There was, right from the beginning, concern for the

improved communications facilities and transmission procedures (Rooy, 1978). Then as independence movements developed in Asia and Africa, and Latin American countries experienced waves of political and economic change, the call for a "new economic order" was sounded. Third world countries demanded realignment of the priorities and the procedures of the ecomonic system to reflect a greater degree of balance between themselves and the developed nations. As the demands for economic reforms were being made, calls came for a "new information order". One of the proponents of the new order was Juan Somavia, director of the Instituto Latinoamericano de Estudios Transnacionales (ILET). In 1976 he summarized three elements as follows: (translation from the Spanish by the author)

a) Information is not simply merchandise and the information function is not just another business; on the contrary, it is a right and a matter of social welfare and an eminent social function;

b) The process of education does not end with the end of formal education, whether that be public school or university. Education takes place also, and in a form even more effective, through the media of mass communication, that influence the student population as much as the adult population which has completed its formal education. At present there exists absolute discord between the preoccupation with the characteristics and contents of the formal education process and the relative lack of preoccupation with the way in which the media of communication exercise, without any explicit detailing of their social responsibility, their educative function.

c) The need for participation of national majorities in the development and carrying out of national development policies is a concept that must be considered concomitantly with the concept that in the future the recipient of the communication process must have more than the theoretic right to buy or not to buy a newspaper or magazine and turn on or turn off the television and radio, as a way expressing opinion about a given medium of communication (Juan Somavia, ed., 1976).

The call for a new information order has developed increasing strength since the

early 1970s. In 1972, the foreign ministers of the Andean Pact nations expressed their preoccupation that, "the major volume of news circulation in our countries is processed outside of our region." In 1973, the chiefs of state of the non-aligned nations meeting in Algiers issued a declaration that the non-aligned nations should take joint action in the field of communications to reorganize the currect channels of information."

The movement came to a head in the 19th General Conference of the United Nations Economic Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Nairobi, Kenya in November 1976. The resolution was titled, "Draft declaration on fundamental principles governing the use of the mass media in strenthening peace and international understanding and in combating war propaganda, racism and apartheid." After two and a half days of debate the conference voted to send the declaration back for revision and a "profound and methodical study of the totality of the communication problems in the modern world." A panel of 16 eminent media specialists from around the world has been conducting the study and the resulting report, expected to establish UNESCO media policy for decades. The report and a revised draft of the resolution on a "new information order" are expected to be principal elements of the 20th General Conference of UNESCO in November of this year (Harley, 1978).

Thus, the "balanced flow" position is one which advocates a change in the way mass media view themselves and their function in the world. The "new order" would require the media to view all their output from the standpoint of educational and social values, with concomitant restrictions on information gathering and distribution functions.

THE THIRD WORLD AND THE MASS MEDIA

In the controversy over international flow of information, the free flow and the balanced flow advocates have given little attention to some important cultural and informational needs and aspirations of the vast majority of the world's population.

In July 1976, information ministers of 58 non-aligned countries met in New Delhi, India in a conference sponsored by UNESCO to discuss the creation and pooling of news agencies that would collect and distribute news and information from the developing world to the rest of the world. Similar conferences were held in San Jose, Costa Rica and in Colombo, Sri-Lanka. The concept of a third world news agency and pooling of "developmental journalism" has been identified almost totally with the balanced flow camp and has been roundly attacked by advocates of the free flow camp such as Leonard R. Sussman (Sussman, 1977). The "developmental journalism" advocates and the persons who propose new organizations for gathering and distribution of news which is ignored and passed over by the AP, UPI, Reuters and Agence France Press and Tass, are not necessarily proponents of the kinds of control suggested by the three points previously cited from Samovia. The establishment of one, five or fifteen news agencies designed to gather, and disseminate news should be for the advocates of "free flow" a positive, not a negative proposition. The limitations of such organizations are obvious--the difficulty of funding on a long term basis, the lack of qualified professional journalist to man it and the paucity of media outlets willing to commit space on a continuing basis to such information. These and other difficulties would be so formidable as to make such undertakings unlikely to succeed. The latter problem should be noted in particular.

Space in which to publish news is a constant problem with newspapers almost anywhere in the world. By the time priority local and national news and advertising go into a newspaper, there is relatively little space for international news. Let's say that the editor of El Dia, a major morning daily in Montevideo, Uruguay, has space for three or four fairly short dispatches or two long ones. To fill that space he has access to dispatches from two of the established world agencies Reuters and Associated Press, and two new agencies Developmental News International (DNI) and Nonaligned World News (NWN) (both, obviously, fictitious agencies presented here for the purpose of the example). From AP and Reuters there are dispatches concerning an earthquake in Taskent,

the crash of a 747 Jumbo jet at London's Heathrow airport, the arrest of Mohamed Ali on wife abuse charges, and the marriage of Guillermo Vilas to Chris Evert, and a string of similar dispatches.

At the same time DNI and NWN offer dispatches announcing the spectacular success of a five-year program to eliminate parasites in Paraguayan cattle; the signing in Singapore of a trade aggreement among 10 Asian and Southeast Asian nations that will eliminate tariffs on nonchemical fertilizers and manual farm implements; a dispatch from Moscow detailing Soviet charges that the United States and China have colluded to corner the world grass-seed market, and full text of the inaugural speech of Ahmed Zahid Iqbal newly elected president of Bangladesh, and a string of similar dispatches.

The editor at El Dia will choose, if my 20 years of experience with Latin American journalists gives me any insight, the Paraguayan cattle story from the third world agency and the rest of the stories from AP or Reuter. In my estimation that is not a bad situation. The development of new third world news agencies--aligned, non-aligned or re-aligned--is neither the great spectre of doom that some "free flow" proponents declare, nor a great leap forward that the "balanced flow" advocates would have us believe. The last word--literally--remains with the local gatekeepers in newspapers and radio and television stations.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The international communications systems of the world are controlled and operated largely by Western capitalist "free flow" oriented organizations. They gather, package and distribute news, information and entertainment quickly, efficiently and profitably.

Like other enterprises, the "bottom line" is a key factor in decisions about content and distribution of services. Such a policy leaves a large part of the world's population undercovered, underinformed and culturally as well as spacially segregated. These powers denounce and resist proposals which would impose restrictions on the gathering, processing and distribution of information. And, naturally, they oppose entrance of competitors into the market place.

Other powerful forces in the world have identified the vast capabilities of the mass media and have used them for the purposes of education/indoctrination within the nations they control. They have also correctly concluded that the imbalance in the flow of information to and from developing nations is a source of frustration and discontent. They propose changes in the way world information is gathered, processed and distributed which would upgrade the educational/indoctrinational capabilities of the media and force them into the service of "development" as they define it.

But the methods of these balanced flow proponents are heavyhanded, their doctrines ponderous and their communication output boring as hell.

Three quarters of the earth's population is faced with a dilemma. They either sign up for slam-bam-thank-you-mam-grins-and-fun-or-disaster-and-misery communication, beautifully packaged and rapidly delivered, or they have to settle for ham-fisted doctrine, cut and dried and predigested, wrapped in butcher paper and delivered two weeks late.

What ought to happen, sometime, is that the free flow potentates will develop a greater sense of social responsibility and, undoubtedly, find it in their self interest to provide more educational, culturally valid and meaningful information. And the

balanced flow revolutionaries will tone down their restrictive, bureaucratic collectivist dogmas, acquire a sense of humor and, find it in their self interest to provide more educational, culturally valid and meaningful information. If that happens then mass communication will be a cultural bridge, not a propaganda tool.

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